

SOFTWARE HELP

Clear problem with transparent GIFs

Q I use Paint Shop Pro to create images for my website and often produce GIFs with cutouts to avoid them all being box-shaped. The problem is that PSP adds a black outline around the edge of the cutout. This is fine when I'm laying it over a dark-coloured background, but for lighter backgrounds it looks a bit shoddy. Why is this happening and is there any way to stop it?

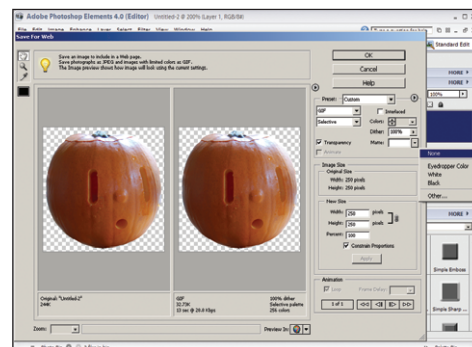
Graham Mellor

A This problem is common to several image editors, including Photoshop and Photoshop Elements. It arises from the fact that image editors can handle variable levels of transparency in an image, but in the saved GIF file each pixel can only be fully transparent or fully visible. Bitmap images are made up of grids of pixels, so it's impossible to create a smooth diagonal line. Instead, you get a jagged edge. Paint Shop Pro and most other bitmap editors minimise this effect by softening the edges of diagonal lines. Draw a black triangle on a white background, and the software will create grey pixels along the edge.

When you're creating a cutout, the software doesn't know which colour background you intend to put the graphic on. So instead of blending the black triangle with, say, a white background, it blends it with different levels of transparency. This way, a pixel that only just touches the cut-out area may be given 10 per cent opacity, whereas a pixel that's almost fully inside the cut-out area might be given 90 per cent opacity. When you paste the cutout into a new image, this variable opacity allows the new background to show selectively through the edges to give a smooth transition.

Because each pixel in a GIF image file is either visible or transparent, the pixels that are only partly transparent must be adapted. By default, Paint Shop Pro assumes the background will be black and converts the percentage of transparency in each pixel into the same percentage of black, giving the image a black border. As you've discovered, this works fine if the intended background is black, but if you place it on a white background you'll get a black halo.

There are two ways around this. If you know the colour of the background on your web page, you can specify it in Paint Shop Pro so

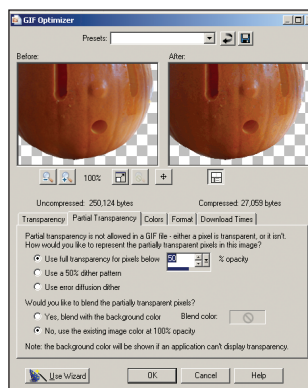


▲ To fix the problem in Photoshop Elements, select **Save For Web** from the menu, choose a GIF template, tick **Transparency** and select **None** from the **Matte** list

the transparent pixels are blended accordingly. To do this, set Paint Shop Pro's Foreground or Background Colour to match your intended background colour by clicking on it in the Materials palette. If your web editor uses HTML colour numbers (in the format #00CCCC), you can copy and paste this straight into Paint Shop Pro's Material Properties dialog box.

Select **Save** or **Save As** in the normal way from the File menu, choose GIF in the **Save as type:** field and click **Options** followed by **Run Optimiser**. You'll be presented with various advanced options for saving your GIF file. Make sure transparency is switched on under the **Transparency** tab, then click the **Partial Transparency** tab. You'll see the question 'Would you like to blend the partially transparent pixels?' Select **Yes** then right-click **Blend color:** and click the colour you defined in the Material Properties dialog box.

If you want to keep your background colour options open, or you're using a patterned background, it's best not to blend the image. Instead click the 'No, use the existing image color at 100% opacity' option. Unfortunately, you'll find that the jagged edges Paint Shop Pro was trying to avoid will reappear. You can reduce these by experimenting with the three options on the upper half of this dialog. We find the best results tend to come from selecting **Use full transparency for pixels below 50 per cent opacity**. **BP**



▲ PSP has a variety of remedies to get around the GIF format's inability to display semi-transparent pixels

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Kay Ewbank

Database developer and productivity expert Kay Ewbank offers help with office applications.



Ben Pitt

Professional musician and photography enthusiast Ben Pitt gives advice on using creative software.



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Pasting plain data

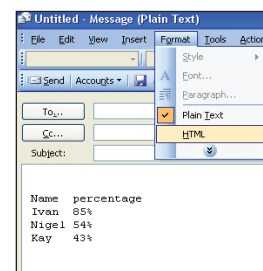
Q How can I transfer data from Excel to Outlook or Word without creating a table in Word or borders in Outlook?

Brian D'Silva

A It can be annoying to have Word create a table when all you wanted was the data. In Word, use **Edit, Paste Special,**

Unformatted Text. Column breaks will be replaced by tabs. The result probably won't look as tidy as it did in Excel, but the data won't be in a table.

The only simple way to do the same thing in Outlook is to set the format of the email message into which you're inserting the data as plain text. This is done using **Plain Text** on the **Format** menu. **KE**



▲ Set the format in Outlook to **Plain Text** to paste in tabular data without creating borders

How do I process a list in a single Excel cell?

Q I use Excel to keep track of the work done by our small plumbing company. One spreadsheet lists our rates for the various actions that might make up a job. This sheet contains the price for each action, alongside its code: H1500 for drain heating, H1502 for refill heating system/cylinder, H1503 for drain down and flush radiator and so on.

Another spreadsheet holds details of the jobs we're currently working on, such as the postcode, the date the job was done and so on. A single column holds the list of action codes for each job, separated by spaces. So one job might have:

H1500 H1502 H1503x8

This would show we drained down eight radiators.

At the moment, the engineers give me the action codes, I enter them, look up the prices in the other spreadsheet and enter the overall job value into a cell next to the action codes cell. We use this to estimate our daily takings. Could I get Excel to look up the values and work out the job value?

Carol Johnston

A We've had a spate of questions regarding processing data lumped together in a single cell. Excel's built-in formulae are designed to work with cells containing a single item of data each. For your problem, we need a function that will split your list of actions into its component parts.

Software Help has recently looked at using Excel's FIND function along with text-chopping functions such as RIGHT and MID to divide a string wherever a space is. Your problem is trickier, because you don't know how long a string might be and how many individual prices need to be looked up. We could use FIND to locate the spaces, but in this case it's easier to write a macro that works through the string using two loops.

The macro works as follows. We create an array to hold all the job's action codes. Because actions can include a count (as shown in H1503x8), the array has two dimensions. Arrays are variables used to store multiple values. You can put one value in myarray(1), a second value in myarray(2) and so on. If you have more than one dimension, you can put one value in myarray(1,1), a second value in myarray(1,2), a third in myarray(2,1) and so on.

The macro extracts the codes in stages. First, the text is split at every space. The value from the active cell is stored in a variable called Codes. A loop, using i as a counter, works through the characters in codes looking for spaces. When a space is found, the inner loop (using k as a counter) moves forward until it meets another space. The code is extracted using:

```
m = Mid(codes, i, k - i)
```

The next part of the macro checks whether there's an x in the code, as in H1503x8. Instr is used to find the position of the x and everything to the left is put in the first column of the array; the number of times the action was carried out is put in the second column. If there's no x, we put a 1 in the second column to show the job was done once. The second part of the macro takes the array of codes that make up the job and gets the prices from the other workbook, codes.xls, where the codes and their rates are listed.

We've assumed the codes are stored in the first 500 lines of column A in codes.xls. Consider the line:

```
Set c = .Find(codearray(i, 1),  
LookIn:=xlValues)
```

This locates the current code in that portion of codes.xls. If it's found, the value from column B of that row is extracted and added to the running total for the job using:

```
total = total + (.Cells(cellrow, 2)  
* codearray(i, 2))
```

Finally, the running total is copied back into the job estimate cell in the jobs spreadsheet using:

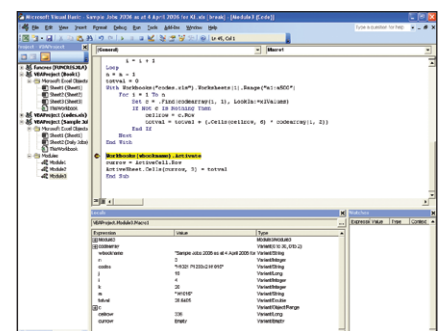
```
Workbooks(wbookname).Activate  
currow = ActiveCell.Row  
ActiveSheet.Cells(currow, 3) = total
```

Here's the full macro:

```
Sub Macro1()  
Dim codearray(30, 2)  
wbookname = ActiveWorkbook.Name  
n = 1  
codes = ActiveCell.Value  
j = Len(codes)  
i = 1  
Do While i <= j  
If Mid(codes, i, 1) = " " Or i = 1  
Then
```

```
'start of a code  
k = i + 1  
Do While k <= j And Mid(codes, k,  
1) <> " "  
k = k + 1  
Loop  
m = Mid(codes, i, k - i)  
If Instr(1, m, "x") Then  
codearray(n, 1) = Trim(Left(m,  
Instr(1, m, "x") - 1))  
codearray(n, 2) = Right(m, Len  
(m) - Instr(1, m, "x"))  
n = n + 1  
Else  
codearray(n, 1) = Trim(m)  
codearray(n, 2) = 1  
n = n + 1  
End If  
i = k - 1  
End If  
i = i + 1  
Loop  
n = n - 1  
total = 0  
With Workbooks("codes.xls").  
Worksheets(1).Range("a1:a500")  
For i = 1 To n  
Set c = .Find(codearray(i, 1),  
LookIn:=xlValues)  
If Not c Is Nothing Then  
cellrow = c.Row  
total = total + (.Cells (cell  
row, 2) * codearray(i, 2))  
End If  
Next  
End With  
Workbooks(wbookname).Activate  
currow = ActiveCell.Row  
ActiveSheet.Cells(currow, 3) = total  
End Sub
```

KE



▲ Excel's debugging tool will run the macro step by step and show the value of all the variables

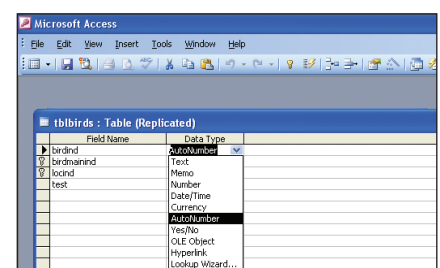
Resetting auto-numbering

✉ In Software Help, May 2006, Ralph Henderson asked how to reset the auto-numbering field in a table after testing a new database in Access. You suggested two methods. But wouldn't it be simpler to delete the auto-numbering ID field and re-create it in the design view of the table? This will give you consecutive ID numbers.

Eirian W Hopkins

A This method would indeed work most of the time and would be simpler than our original suggestions. However, you might not be allowed to delete an auto-numbering field if you had other tables related to that particular field.

Any queries or views that included the auto-numbering field would also complain if you tried to do this. KE



▲ You could simply delete an AutoNumber field to reset the numbering

Customising Outlook startup

Q I have a problem with Outlook 2000. The startup default display used to be the Inbox folder. Now it starts with the Contacts folder. How can I return it to its original startup folder?

Pete

A If you click on the Tools menu and choose Options then the Other tab, you'll find a button labelled Advanced. Press this and look under General settings to find an option named Start up in this folder. You can browse to select the folder you want, which is the Inbox in your case.

You can also use command-line switches to force Outlook to show different folders. For example, you might want two icons on your desktop: one to start Outlook in the Calendar and one to open showing your Inbox. First create a shortcut to open Outlook. You'll need to find Outlook on your hard disk to do this. The location will be something like C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe.

Next, on the Windows desktop, right-click and choose New, Shortcut then browse to the location of your copy of Outlook. When you've found it, click OK. But before clicking Next to go on to the next step, you need to add a command-line switch to the end of the line that looks like this:

C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe

The exact switch you add depends on what you want to happen. If you want to have Outlook start in the contacts folder, add:

/select outlook:contacts

Your entire line would read:

"C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe" /select outlook:contacts

To show the Calendar, you'd have:

"C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe" /select outlook:calendar

To show the inbox, you'd have:

"C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe" /select outlook:inbox

To show the folder called Friends stored in the inbox, you'd have:

"C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe" /select outlook:inbox/friends

There's a whole list of possible switches you can use. If you want to see the other options, search the Outlook help file for command-line switches. One useful option is:

"C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe" /recycle

This opens the same view as the one in use when Outlook closed. Another handy choice if you're connecting to an Exchange Server is:

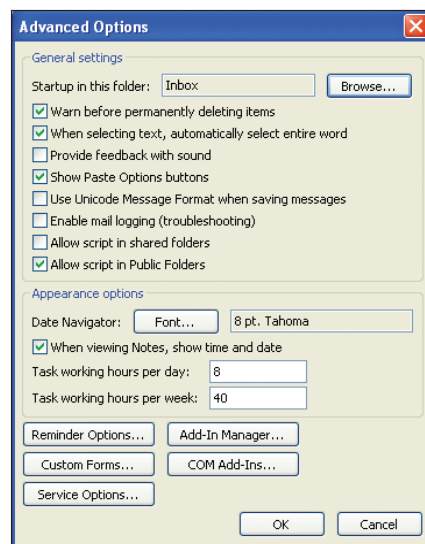
"C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe" /cleanfreebusy

This clears and regenerates the free/busy information so you know your appointments list is up to date.

There are also several 'safe' options, the most comprehensive being:

"C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe" /safe

This starts Outlook without extensions, the Reading Pane or toolbar customisation. This makes Outlook less susceptible to viruses and other unwanted software. **KE**



▲ You can specify which folder Outlook should start in from the Tools, Options menu

Smoother mix needed for DJ CDs

Q I use my PC to record mix CDs from my DJ mixer and want to put track IDs at the beginning of each track. I've been using Audacity to split the audio up into individual tracks and burning them with Easy Media Creator, but this sometimes creates glitches, clicks and gaps at the beginning of tracks. How can I avoid this?

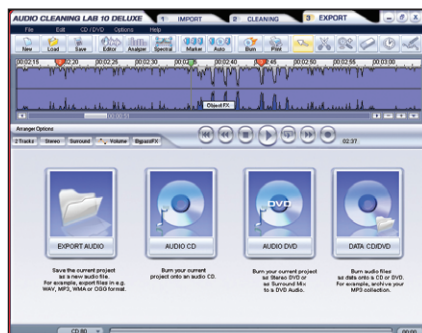
Jerry Radtke

A There are a variety of reasons why you may be encountering this problem. You need to be careful when chopping the music up in Audacity so you don't leave bits out or repeat sections at the end of one track and the beginning of the next. The best way to do this is to use the Cut tool to remove sections from the full mix, then paste them into a new file. This will guarantee you don't duplicate bits, as you can with the Copy tool. Also, be sure to record and save files in Wav format at the CD specification of 44.1kHz, 16-bit. Saving them as MP3s will alter the file's contents, which may cause problems as the CD progresses from one track to the next.

In Easy Media Creator, make sure Disc at Once is selected in the Advanced Options and turn off the other audio CD options such as

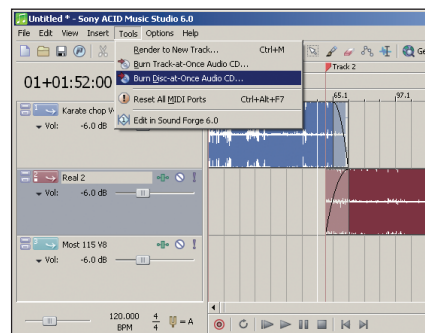
Normalise tracks and Reduce background noise. Make sure the Pre-Gap for each track is 0 seconds; otherwise, you'll have silence inserted between tracks. Don't worry about the two-second Pre-Gap for the first track. This is a standard part of the audio CD specification and can't be changed, but it just means there'll be two seconds' silence at the beginning of the disc.

If problems persist, consider upgrading to more capable audio CD-authoring software. Magix' Audio Cleaning Lab 10, which we



▲ Magix Audio Cleaning Lab is well-equipped for creating audio CDs, with full control over track IDs and various audio optimisation tools

reviewed in *What's New* in the May 2006 issue, allows you to insert start ID markers at any point on the disc, saving the hassle of chopping up audio in Audacity. Just locate the point you want and hit M. Sony Acid Music Studio, which we looked at in *What's New, Shopper* January 2006, does the same but has the added advantage of some excellent DJ-friendly mixing and remixing tools. Once you've added your start ID markers, simply select Burn Disc-at-Once Audio CD from the Tools menu. **BP**



▲ Sony Acid Music Studio can burn a CD straight from its arrange page and is perfect for DJs with an interest in music production

Classier-looking charts in Excel

Q I've created a bar chart in Excel and thought it would be nice to put a background image behind it to brighten things up. But the results were overpowering. Ideally, I'd prefer a watermark to a full-on image. However, at the moment I'd settle for just getting rid of the flipping thing.

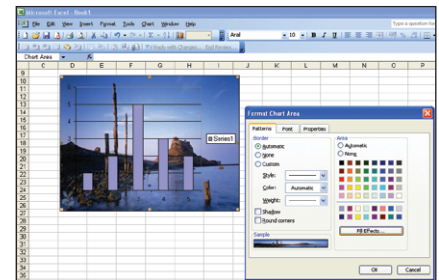
I put it in by right-clicking on the chart. From there, I selected Format Plot Area and from the options on that page I chose Fill Effects. I picked the Picture tab and browsed until I found the image I wanted to use. When I go back and repeat the process, there's no way to say 'None'. What can I do, other than starting again with a new chart?

Mike Goodwin

A To remove the picture, use the Pattern settings of the Format Plot Area dialog and set the Area to None. This gets rid of the picture.

Many graphics packages let you edit pictures to give them a watermark look. If your graphics package won't let you do this, and you have Microsoft Word installed on your computer, here's a quick way to achieve the same effect.

Open a new Word document and choose Format, Background, Printed Watermark. Insert the image you want to use in your Excel chart. It will appear in your Word document with the washed-out look you want in Excel. Now press your keyboard's PrtScrn (Print Screen) button to copy the screen to the clipboard. Open Paint or the image-editing software of your choice, paste



▲ Turning a background image for a chart into a watermark first stops it overwhelming the data

the image as a new picture and crop the image so only the graphic you want is in the picture.

Now save the watermark picture to use as the background image for your chart. **KE**

Can I keep two database copies in sync?

Q I have created a database in Access 2000 containing customer information. A colleague has a copy of the same database on his PC. When I enter new information into my database, I'd like to be able to send him an update via email so he can update his database with the new information. Likewise, when he adds new information, I need to update my database.

Are such email updates possible and, if so, how do I get them working?

Dave Gault

A The kind of database you're describing is called a distributed database, because it consists of two or more data files located at different sites. It's an important concept in database design. You've already discovered its primary problem: keeping the distributed data in sync.

When two people are updating a database at the same time, synchronisation can be a pain. Suppose both you and your colleague add a new customer at the same time. You add a customer called Fred Bloggs and Fred gets customer ID 1027 on your computer. At the same time, your colleague is adding Gordon Bennett as customer ID 1027 on his computer. Whatever means you use to synchronise the data, you'll encounter this problem: which customer should have ID 1027? If you send your friend your changes, Gordon could disappear into oblivion. If your friend sends his first, Fred might bite the dust.

The simplest way round this problem is to assign the two copies of the database different blocks of potential customer IDs. So when you add a new record to the database, the new ID is picked from the block starting 100000; when your colleague adds a new record, its ID is picked from the block starting 200000. Choose the blocks to suit the maximum number of records you're likely to use.

This has the advantage that you can see at a glance who added the information for Fred Bloggs; if the customer ID is between 100000 and 199999, you added it. If it's between 200000 and 299999, your colleague added it.

You also need to determine which data needs to be transferred between the databases and how to import it. There are various ways to do this. One is to add a column to each table that shows whether the record needs synchronising with the matching record in the other table. This would be set to True if any changes were made to the record. So if you changed the address for Fred Bloggs, some code on your form would set the Synchronise field to True.

Even with these precautions, clashes can occur. Suppose you enter Fred's new telephone number on your copy of the database, and at the same time your colleague is entering a new credit limit for Fred. Both of your records for Fred will be marked as updated and in need of synchronisation. You need to work out what should happen in this case. If you apply incoming updates regardless of whether the record affected is marked as updated locally, this would mean changes made on the other PC would always take precedence over local changes.

Another option would be to nominate a master user who will perform the main synchronisation. They import the changed records from the remote database, they are shown which changes conflict with local changes and they decide which should take precedence. All local changes that take effect can be repeated on the remote database unattended. Even the most sophisticated and expensive database management software resorts to human decisions in this way, because there's no correct answer as to which updated data is the right choice.

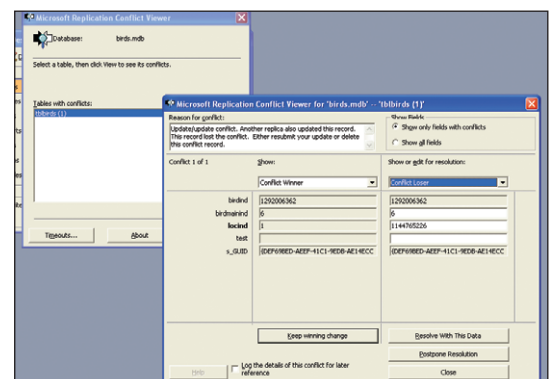
Luckily, Access has a replication feature designed to deal with your exact situation. Replication lets you make copies or 'replicas' of the database so users can work on their own copies at different locations. The replicas can then be synchronised. The facilities in Access are fairly basic; you get a table of conflicts where you are shown the two versions and asked whether you want to keep the main data or the replica data. At least it identifies which records have been

changed. When combined with the technique described above of having separate customer ID blocks, it can work well.

To create a replica database in Access, choose Replication from the Tools menu. From the options shown, pick Create Replica. You'll be asked to select a name for the replicated database. This will be a separate copy that you can send to your colleague for use on his PC. When you or your colleague makes changes, you'll need to send the entire database (or large parts of it) back and forth for synchronisation, unless you have a copy of the Access Replication Manager. This was last included with Microsoft Office XP Developer Edition; it was dropped from the Office 2003 versions.

If you are fortunate enough to have the old version, you get the choice of synchronising over a network or the internet. There's a third-party replication utility you can download for free from www.trigeminal.com/replication/synch.asp?1033. It doesn't come with much help, but it's worth a try. It wouldn't be too hard to write some VBA replication routines yourself.

Once you've synchronised your databases, sort out any conflicts. On the Tools menu, select Replication, Resolve Conflicts. In the Conflict Viewer, select a table that has conflicts from the list and click View. You'll need to go through all the conflicts, choosing between the different versions of the data. **KE**



▲ Resolving conflicts in an Access replicated database